



**Testimony of Evan Preston, State Director  
Connecticut Public Interest Research Group (ConnPIRG)**

**To the Government Administration and Elections Committee  
Opposing Senate Bill 1126: An Act Concerning Revisions to Campaign Finance Laws**

Chairman Cassano, Chairman Jutila, Ranking Member MacLachlan, Ranking Member Smith and members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony.

The Citizen's Election Program has had a positive impact on elections in Connecticut since its inception almost a decade ago. The Citizen's Election Program offers a platform in which candidates who want to seek grassroots financial support from their constituents can run for office. In the first two election cycles after Citizen's Election Program went into effect, a majority of contributions to candidates were in amounts of under \$100. In contrast, in federal races and in states without public financing programs, a virtual handful of large donors can equal the spending power of every single small donor in the nation.<sup>1</sup> When campaigns are powered by small-donors and grassroots support rather than large contributions from special interests, our democracy is strengthened.

Because the Citizen's Election Program is critical to the health of democracy in Connecticut, it deserves to be strengthened to ensure the voices of ordinary people can be heard through their support for candidates and to encourage public trust in the functioning of our elections. Unfortunately, Senate Bill 1126 as currently drafted does not address the most important ways in which the Citizen's Election Program should be strengthened. There are multiple areas in which S.B. 1126 does not strengthen the Citizen's Election Program.

First, S.B. 1126 fails to include clarifying language that would determine the definition of a candidate for the purposes of elections law and "coordination." Without such a clarification as recommended by the State Elections Enforcement Commission, it may be possible that an incumbent candidate could coordinate spending until that candidate actually formed a candidate committee or, by common practice, not until May of the election year. S.B. 1126 proposes the length of coverage for a "coordinated spender" with respect to joint staff to be only one election cycle, whereas two cycles would offer a better representation to voters of coordination that may occur.

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<sup>1</sup> "Billion-Dollar Democracy" ConnPIRG and Demos, 2013. <http://www.connpirg.org/reports/ctp/billion-dollar-democracy>

Second, in Sections 19-21, it appears that S.B. 1126 would make it more difficult for petitioning or minor parties to qualify under the Citizen's Election Program. Such a step is a move in the wrong direction for a system whose purpose is to strengthen our state's democracy by encouraging candidates not to depend on large donors and thus facilitate more candidates with more ideas to have a chance to run a competitive race, allowing voters to choose the best ideas themselves.

Third, in Section 25, S.B. 1126 curtails the ability of the State Elections Enforcement Commission's ability to conduct a review of election law compliance after Election Day. A necessary, though wholly insufficient, condition for good government is the effective enforcement of election law. Potential violators of election law would appear to be allowed to violate the law without facing investigation if those violators did so in consecutive elections as Section 25 prohibits auditing of candidates or candidates committees "whose candidate committee was audited at the preceding election or primary." S.B. 1126 goes on to restrict the ability of the State Elections Enforcement Commission to have appropriate staffing to investigate potential violations. This section would provide a license to spend public financing funding without oversight under the law. It does not aid public trust in our elections to limit the investigation of potential violation of election law.

Fourth, in Section 26, S.B. 1126 repeals the prohibition on giving public funding to party committees. This too is a step in the wrong direction as the purpose of the Citizen Election Program was to connect candidates with small-donor grassroots supporters in their own constituencies.

ConnPIRG cannot support S.B. 1126 as it is currently drafted. Instead, we recommend the members of the committee consider the recommendations of the State Elections Enforcement Commission in its proposal to strengthen the Citizen's Election Program. One of the most important ways the Citizen's Election Program needs to be strengthened is the repeal of Public Act 13-180's establishment of unlimited organizational expenditures by state central party committees. ConnPIRG urges the committee to act on such a proposal either through amending S.B. 1126 or through separate legislation. In addition, ConnPIRG urges the committee to act on the other main points of the State Elections Enforcement Commission's proposal including adopting the SEEC recommended language on coordinated spenders and making state code the guidance offered by SEEC in response to the U.S. Supreme Court's *McCutcheon* decision, regarding how to define independent expenditure committees.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

Evan Preston, ConnPIRG State Director